

The RYERSON
POETRY
CHAP-BOOKS



Beggar Makes
Music

By
Goodridge MacDonald

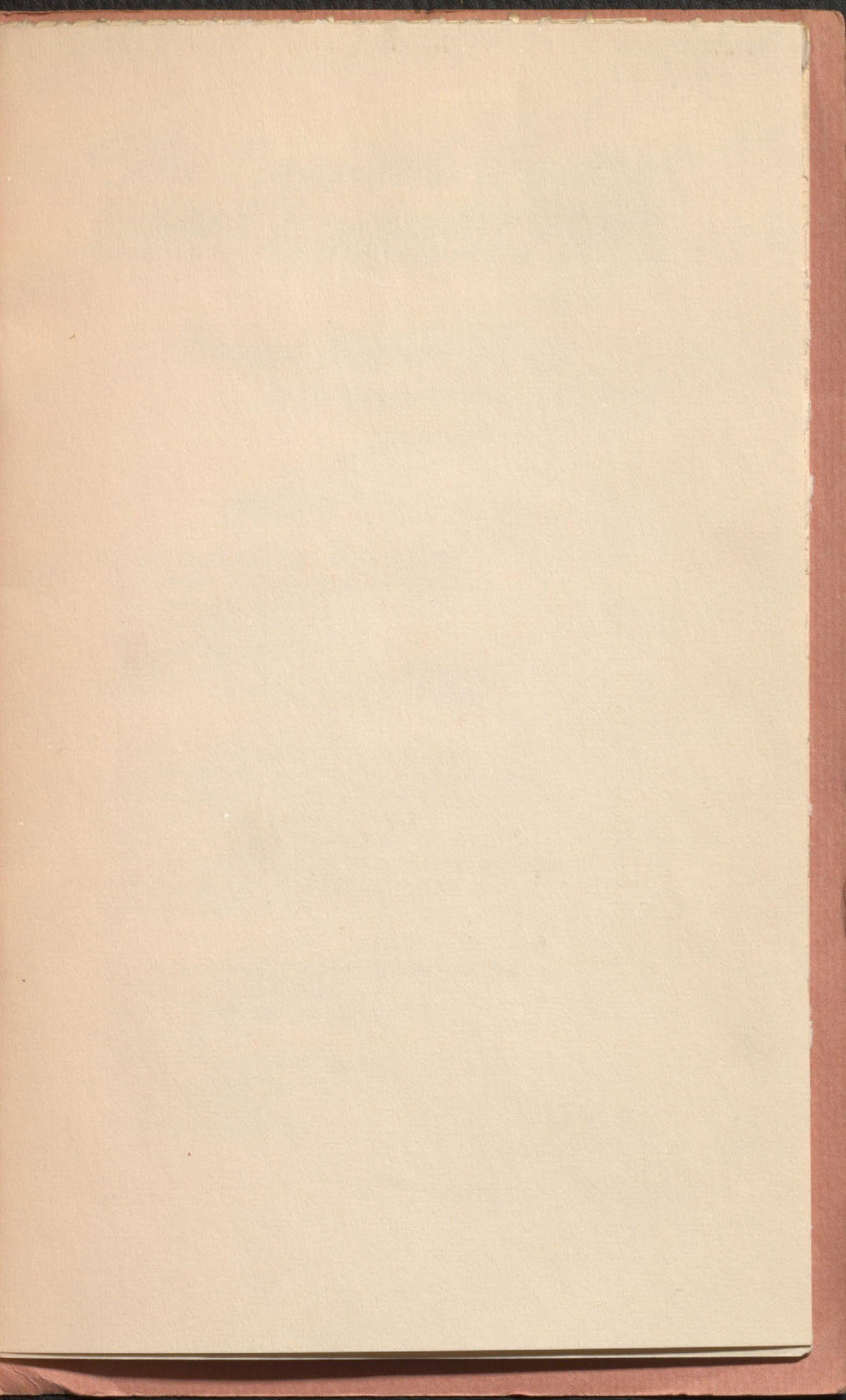
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The Ryerson Poetry *Chapbooks*

Beggar Makes Music

by Goodridge MacDonald



BEGGAR MAKES MUSIC

A grey faced man from whose accordion
Grey music runs into the street tumult.
The beating to and fro
Of varied feet, nor the clatter
Of trams, nor animal noises
Of cars, to east to west, subdue the music,
Although it is toneless and without colour.

It pulses from between his pudgy hands
Dominantly; stating the truisms of popular song,
Going a long way back for its truisms—
That it is a long way to Tipperary
And that we must keep the home fires burning
Or, stating the later facts with the same unaccent,
Alleging manana is good enough for me
And you can have her.

It weaves through the feet and cars and trams
And beats into my blood.
No tune is different from those
Hands, but all
Reduced to one reiterated word
That is not protest,
That is not regret,
Nor quite acceptance,

But a statement, said over and over,
Cried over and over
In the accordion voice that has emotion
And the lost spirit in it;
So that doomed men might dance to that music
And men might march heavily through mud,
Under bursting shells, with packs on their backs,
As they have, God knows.

It beats into the blood
And the man stands,
Heavy-faced, unmoving, except for the hands
That move as though to a key-wound spring.

He has a good place
In front of the best department
Store, between tram stops,
Where many with change in their pockets
Must pass, and many pause
To put pennies, nickels, dimes
Into the cup that is beside him.

When day is done, with silver-heavy pockets
Does he to hidden snuggerly return
And there, his greasy grey discarded
For suit flamboyant, garments costly cut,
Imported woollens and luxurious shirtings,
Sit down to dine
And pour his Scotch, or subtly chosen wine,
With plump and painted mistress to complete
His revel, warm his bed through satiate night?

Or is he miser, hoarding up his wages,
Living on crusts and adding to a store
Of bonds and shares and mortgages against the day
When he retires?

Or perhaps it is mostly pennies
That rattle in the cup, and when
His work is ended, he drags off
Weary and sick, to the slum's drabbest corner,
To a room where a pale daughter
Awaits him, and the pennies that must buy
Their meagre daily bread?

His face gives no answer. Some record there
Of dissolution is inscribed, and illness
Has left its mark, but these
Are yesterday's entries. It is a face
Inhuman, lifeless . . .

Lifeless.—And these are dead men passing by;
Dead men and women, so the music says,
For they are chords for corpses that flow out
Between the hands of the beggar.

Each man, said the poet, kills the thing he loves.
Sometimes the thing he loves kills him.

This man of middle age and prosperous air—
Ten years ago the poniard pierced him through,
Since when he walks a corpse along the way
And waiting to be buried.

Yesterday,
This woman of the weary wary eyes
And bargain counter garb
Succumbed, and grave clothes better
Became her.

There are those
Who died the inching death of malnutrition,
Self-starved or other-starved, the spirit
Flickering out, and leaving ghost to hurry
Past the music and its maker.

And the music
Weaves for them a pattern,
Snaring the feet that there may be no resurrection.

No resurrection, although above
The beggar and the building where he stands
And beyond a street, there rises
Atop a steeple, the Cross.

For men will rise from the graves the grave-digger digs
And the ashes from the urn put on
Incorruption; yet from the grave
Of the spirit, who may rise?

Tell me, God-Man, now absent from that Cross,
Did you not pay for these on Calvary?
Are they beyond Thy ransom? . . . the walking dead?
—(This is their measure he presses from the accordion)—
Why have You left your Cross, who should hang there
Even for these interceding? . . .
Showing your wounds to them who pass by?
To us who pass by?

WITH HORSEMAN STEPPING

When images of leaf and birdsong
Impart sensation reflected and remembered,
Delivering no direct impact—
When the ridged skyline
With horseman stepping
Against the sunset—living lemon and
Smouldering red with
Blue, green, purple, above changing
In pastel tones to the tall massing
Of variant greys,
Evokes deliberated ecstasy,
Synthetic passion—

When the form passing, or passed,
With hair blown about pale face,
Sharp-cut, clear-hewn, yet with lines flowing
Like a song in the early morning—
It is time, said Thaddeus,
To find an open grave
And there seek lodging.

So, he thought, may my Lord Christ
Have mused when thirty-three years seemed a long portion
And all who came about him, wearisome.
When the tomb on the hillside beyond the city
Offered a most sweet repose
And Easter Morning
Loomed as a sorry destiny.

THEY BROUGHT HER GOLDENROD

They brought her goldenrod and daisies blue—
Those pale ghost daisies which October flings
Veil-wise across the dearth of withered fields—
The roadside asters of a darker hue
And scarlet leaves and berries; bittersweet
That high its beaconing, painted clusters swings
Among the desperate limbs of strangling trees
And sways and turns before the chilling breeze:

So that at times that white and narrow room
Was tapestried with all the old year yields
Of colour. Those rich trappings of despair
Which even the austere hills in autumn wear,
Which brush the knee and whisper at the feet
Of him who walks the autumn woods, on screen
And dresser burned—high torches in the gloom
To light her dreams from tangled paths of pain
A little while to some familiar scene
Of hill and river that her heart had known.

—When leaves and flowers faded they were thrown
By careless hands aside.—Now once again
The autumn flaunts her flags from field and tree
In last defiance; but I only see
The white walls of a bare and narrow room:
White walls—a closing door—a narrow room.

ST. ANDREW'S REVISITED

Here are the ways my fathers walked. This earth
Knew once their feet. They breathed this quiet air;
Looked on this tumbling river, slumbering hills.
Even then as now the smouldering tamarack
Ensnared the instant eye to draw it back:
—And where the river spills
Into the calmer Ottawa, and where
Hill-slope looks over island, I had birth.

Or part of me.—How many tangled strains
Are woven in this being that is me—
The thing that I call "I".—
The broken image, many times reflected,
Its mirroring of the central sun neglected.
—This thing that tires of life yet will not die
Is partly rooted here, and never free
Of my great grandsire's ecstasies and pains.

It may be the very soil on which I stand
His feet once pressed. His blood is of my blood.
—Born at "the Bay," where the grey ice cakes groan,
His sons are mine; mine, his; even as with him
I walked this very road when day was dim.
—Never was he alone
For I was there, whether for ill or good,
One with the lord of this most pleasant land.

"Take off thy shoes for this is holy ground"—
And it is mete that I make sacrifice,
Here where he built his home
After braving storm and rapids; knowing
Ice-buffeted passages, and the swift-flowing
Western streams—content no more to roam;
Content to rest from staking the high price
Of Company service where the furs are found.

AT A SYMPHONY

Oh, broken heart, the brasses and the reeds
Weep and are silent. Swift and slow pulsate
Dim, unguessed wings of sorrow. Surely hate
And love are long outdreamt. Oh, heart that bleeds,
Listen again, while the predestined seeds
Of sound are sown, bear bloom, and recreate
Their questing beauty, with despair elate,
And know thy answer in each note that pleads.

No more can hope be valiant, but despair
Now arms thee nobly for a nobler fray.
The bugles braying on the heated air,
The hurrying drums, the sounding waves that sway
To splendid death, are one with thee. Beware
No longer the gods' laughter, though it slay!

WALK IN THE WOODS

The pine trees against the sky
Tufted; orange light beyond, and the bare
Branches of oak and birch; the grey-
Green moss under the foot, carpeting.
Greys and greens and browns; and the autumn
Woods all silent.—And you said
“The trees are beautiful without their leaves.”

—Perhaps they are dead. Perhaps
They will wake again in spring;
But am I now dead? Never to wake again,
And but a ghost? And you,
A spectre of that which is lost to me?
Warm spectre mocking a ghost?

—I cannot yet give up the autumn woods.
All these may be
Phantasmagoria, and most unreal,
Yet must I cling,
Nor can I yield
This dream, this ache,
This light among the empty autumn trees,
For any excellent reality.—

Unto this path my feet must turn.—
Here I, a ghost, must walk,
And you, warm spectre, mock.

LOCKING UP

Come, let us bar the window, lock the door,
And throw the key away,
That feet of passing stranger never more
Along these halls may stray.

Now leave the room deserted; touch each stair
By which we climbed to love,
And on the farthest threshold breathe a prayer
In memory thereof.

LAST WORDS

There is Emmet's address from the dock—
There are the sage philosophizings of Socrates
As the hemlock crept heartward—
There are the words spoken from the Cross.
The "We who are about to die salute you"
Of the Roman gladiator echoes long,
And history is rich in final eloquence—
Laudations of liberty and diatribes
Addressed to heedless tyrants; epigrams
Neatly turned by those whose heads would roll
Soon from the block or busy guillotine.

With these and other proclamations
Aptly worded by the doomed
You may be familiar.
(On each Good Friday you may hear
The last words of the convicted Christ
Employed as themes for seven separate sermons.)

But you may not have noted
The last public utterance of Joe Lamothe,
Spoken in the high Court of King's Bench
When His presiding Lordship,
In night-black gloves and tricorn hat arrayed,
Black-gowned, white-cravated,
Conventionally queried
"Have you anything to say
Why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon you?"

And yet, it's worth the noting
As comment on Life, Death, Society;
Woman, Love and Murder,
And it has also
The virtue of brevity.

It is worth recalling spoken as I recall it—
A torturous eruption, brought forth with labour,
With wheezings and whistlings made scarce intelligible,
As though the hemp already tightened
About the swelling throat.

From infancy in a convent creche,
Through orphanage childhood, thwarted youth,
Into grey middle-age, this throttled speech
Had marked him out
As lure for jibe and butt of ridicule.
The bitter bread
Of charity, and then of toil, Joe ate.
Nor did love
At any point in that processional
Of years sweeten the bread,
Or blunt the jibe,
Until his uncharted course
Took him at last to the city, and the woman.

Stray flotsam of the underworld,
Last souvenirs of lost youth fading from her,
And loveliness never hers to lose,
She valued awhile a room and ditch-digger's wages
Above the hungry chances of the street;
She gave him awhile the love he had not known—
And was for him the fairest among women.

Fairest among women—
Wife and mother and sister;
Mistress, and one adored;
Her tarnished coin of tenderness ringing true
To one all unfamiliar with the coin . . .

So when, the interlude ended, she exchanged
Kindness for scorn, care for neglect,
Sweet words for mocking,
Caresses for blows;
Added theft and trickery;
His wounds were deep.
—A beast's wounds perhaps, touching no soul?—
With a beast's bewilderment they were endured
To the final point.

Then a beast's rage
Fired by the agony of a tortured soul—
(Yes. The soul peeped out
A moment from the eyes of Joe Lamothe,
Caged in the dock, by his own words convicted.)—
Was loosed in blind destruction.

He snatched the bottles from the littered floor
And broke them bloodily upon her crown;
With ape-like hands enmeshed her throat,
And with the domestic bread-knife slit her throat,
Making assurance triply sure, and last
Lit paper beneath the chair in which
The human wreckage sagged, still half erect—
Most futile funeral pyre.

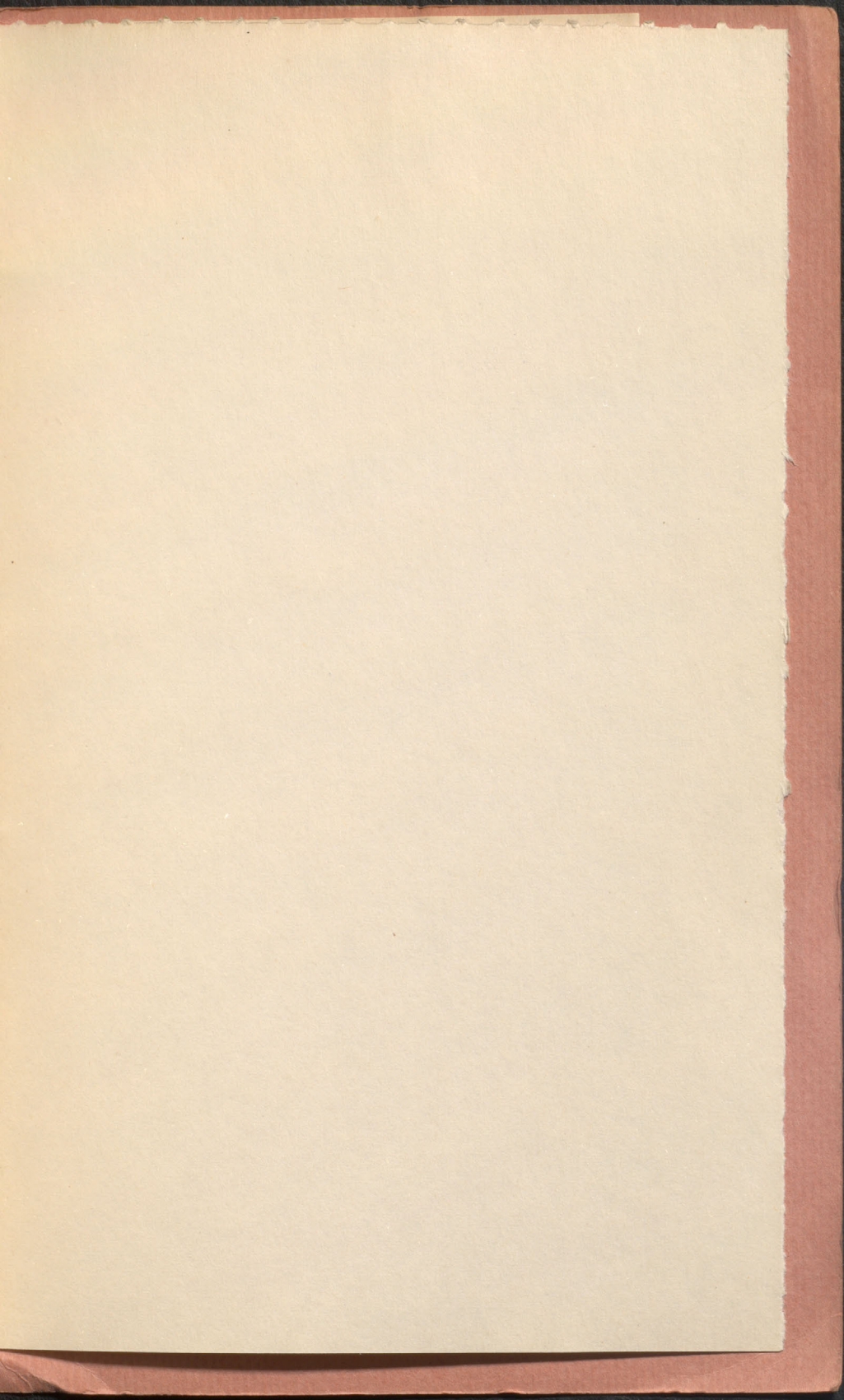
Then took his cap and heavy-booted walked
Down the dark stairs and the dim street
To the tavern where he drank his evening beer . . .
When a crony sought his table
Joe told him in his fumbling speech
How he had killed the woman.

(In addressing the jury
The Court repeated
A favourite whimsicality of judges
To the effect that "God alone is the giver of life
And God alone
Has the right to take it away.")

When, flanked by ready guards, Joe stood at last,
Scarce conscious of the Crucifix that faces
All men condemned in the high Court of King's Bench,
He said—"I have rid the city
Of a piece of carrion."

FINALE

The failure matters not,
Nor the desire
That must be ever seeking
The hidden fire.
All beauty has been written,
All songs sung;
All loveliness attained,
All glory won:
The circle is completed,
The rhythms blended:
The ecstasy of song
Is ended.



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